



TAKE CONTROL OF THE INTERVIEW

By Bill Gaffney

Q: Many times an interviewer will start by asking me, "So tell me about yourself". How do I address that question and what are they looking for? Do they want my whole life history or a review of my career? HELP!!

A: Let me fill out the title of this column first. I am not telling you to go in like Arnold and tell them "I'm back". I am simply saying, as I have before, many interviewers are ill trained and come up with poor questions because they don't know any better. In those cases you have to subtly take control and guide the interview in a direction where the "best you" comes out. If you do you might just be the only one who does and you **will** stand out.

My friend Jeff Skrentny, top Chicago based [IT recruiter](#) and one of the best recruiter trainers in the business, has some excellent suggestions about how to handle this question. The most important suggestion is ask the interviewer, "Where would you like me to start?" Probably 90% of them will tell you either just your career (most likely) or your entire life. The savvy ones will say, "Wherever you would like". If you get one of these you probably have a good interviewer.

This question is an excellent starting point actually. If they don't ask it you should find a place in the interview, where you cover what I am going to suggest to you.

The interviewer (not typically the [HR](#) interviewer as they usually have a preset list of questions) is really interested in three things:

- Accomplishments
- Demonstrated progression in your career
- Scope of responsibilities

Leave your skills for a different point in the interview.

This is really a presentation you should have memorized and rehearsed without sounding robotic. This review should go back 10-12 years and typically cover 2-4 jobs. If you have been with one company during that time review the different positions. If the interviewer wants a history further back they will ask for it.

The presentation for each position should include a brief description of the job, the scope of responsibility (size of budget, people reporting to you, etc) and two or three major accomplishments in that position. Remember an accomplishment is income produced, money saved and/or time saved (production increased). These need to have a reference point such as "I had a targeted budget of 10 million dollars but was able to finish the year at 8 million through productivity increases." If possible include a similar reference point for responsibilities.

Each position you cover should take no more than 1-2 minutes and do just the highlights. Do not get into the minute details. If they want more they will ask. Be careful not to brag, but to me more matter of fact and to exude confidence in your abilities.

If you get asked to review your entire life don't launch into "War and Peace". Instead do the Cliff's Notes" version. They probably don't care at what age you were potty trained or when you took your first swimming lesson. But they might be interested to hear how you did in school or extracurricular activities you were involved in, especially sports. When you talk about your personal life think about things that demonstrate a character or trait related to business, competitiveness, fast starter, teamwork, etc. You might want to also throw in a personal crisis, a death, loss of a competition, etc and follow it with how you responded and overcame it. In interviewing potential [recruiters](#) I always look for this. It shows resilience and determination.

Practice the interview with a spouse, [business](#) acquaintance, friend, etc. until you have it down without having to think about it. Also practice inflection, tempo, tone, etc. You do not want to sound like you've done this 20 times in the last two weeks. Give the person you are practicing with permission to critique you, even to the smallest degree. The more polished you are the better you will come across.



Career Tips

As I stated earlier if you do not get that “Tell me ...” question (and hopefully you won’t) work this presentation into the interview somehow. This is especially easy if the interview is meandering. You might say something like, “Would it be helpful if I reviewed some career highlights with you?”. I guarantee, besides them wanting to hear this, the interviewer will have an immediate sense of relief since they are uncomfortable doing the interview anyway.

I want to finish by saying three things. There are other points in an interview where you might have to take some subtle control. Watch for meandering and relatively pointless questions. Secondly watch your body language. This can really put an interviewer off. Number one, don’t sit with your arms crossed across your chest. This indicates resistance or boredom. You should review material on this subject. Lastly

watch for the interviewers’ tone, inflection, pace, etc. Try to follow that. If they talk slow and deliberately don’t talk fast. This is actually a subtle form of flattery. (You thought I was going to say manipulation, didn’t you?) This will also force you to listen to them without performing answers.

Interviewing is both a science and an art. Don’t take it lightly.

About Author

Bill Gaffney has 17 years experience as an executive recruiter, and a career coach. He is writing this piece from his well landscaped backyard sitting between the Olympic size swimming pool and his koi pond. (Recruiters lie so well.) Bill can be reached at 937-567-5267 or wmgaffney@prodigy.net. For questions to be considered for this column please e-mail askamaxa@yahoo.com.

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